

Laos Air War

- 23 Jul 69      Typescript IM, Commando Hunt: The Air War in Laos  
   Since November 1968
- 26 Feb 70      OER contribution to SNIE update of Graham report re  
   The Sihanoukville Route, The Laotian Panhandle Route,  
   Sea Infiltration, and Conclusions
- 5 Aug 70      Blind Memo re The North Vietnamese Logistical System --  
   Capabilities and Vulnerabilities

5 August 1970

The North Vietnamese Logistical System --  
Capabilities and Vulnerabilities

I. Introduction--The Laotian Panhandle  
and Sihanoukville

Communist forces in South Vietnam have been mainly supported by two separate logistical routes. (1) The Ho Chi Minh Trail from North Vietnam through Laos to South Vietnam and, (2) The sea route through the port of Sihanoukville and then overland to Communist sanctuaries astride the Cambodian-South Vietnamese border.

Washington intelligence analysts and intelligence components at CINCPAC and MACV agree on the judgment that since early 1968 enemy forces in III and IV Corps of South Vietnam have received large amounts of sea-delivered arms and ammunition transshipped through Cambodia.

There has been disagreement, however, between Washington and the field over the relative importance of these land and sea routes. The field view has been that the Communists, since October 1966, have moved military supplies through the port of Sihanoukville and that this route has completely supplied forces in southern II Corps and in III and IV Corps.

The CIA view, concurred in by DIA, has been that the overland route through Laos has been the primary logistics route for the Communist forces, including those that operate in the southern half of South Vietnam. CIA has believed that the Sihanoukville route did not become an important source of supply for the Communists until sometime around mid-year 1968. CIA also estimated that probably no more than one-half of the estimated Communist resupply requirements for arms and ammunition in Southern II, III, and IV Corps were supplied by sea.

MACV has estimated that during the period October 1966 - September 1969 about 17,800 tons of Communist arms and ammunition were delivered to Sihanoukville. The comparable CIA estimate included 7,100 tons of confirmed ordnance (that is, arms and ammunition) and 4,100 tons of other military cargoes both ordnance and non-ordnance. The differences in these estimates stem from differing analyses regarding the size and composition of cargoes, not the sources available to the analysts.

Other differences between CIA and the field have involved the share of Communist arms destined for the Cambodian Armed Forces (FARK) and the tonnage of

~~SECRET~~

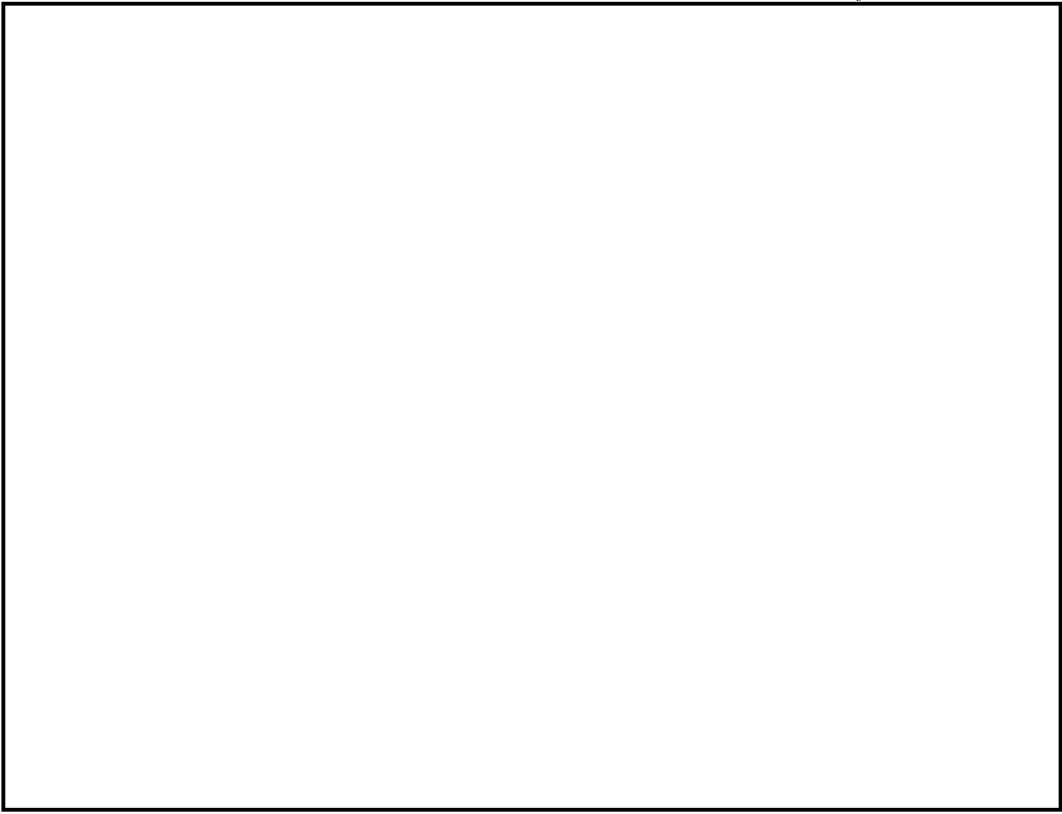
25X1

ordnance that actually moved to the Communist forces. The field position has been that the bulk of these shipments went directly to the Communist forces. The CIA position has been that until recently there has been little reliable evidence with which to quantify this latter flow. Thus the CIA position has been that our intelligence has been inadequate to assess precisely the relative importance of the Sihanoukville and overland routes.

This is still our position as of this moment. Recently, however, CIA has established direct contact with Cambodian officials who were involved in supervising the flow of goods from Sihanoukville to Communist forces in South Vietnam. These officials are providing us with a large body of documentary data on arms shipments to Cambodia. Some of these documents are now in CIA headquarters and are being carefully examined for their authenticity. Once this examination is completed we should be able to make an authoritative, coordinated appreciation of the true role of Sihanoukville. At that time we would be pleased to brief this Board on our revised conclusions.

SECRET

Whatever the precise role Sihanoukville has played in the past in supporting enemy forces in South Vietnam, it is apparent that the Communists have for the present lost this convenient back-door route to their forces in lower South Vietnam. The total logistic burden must now be carried by the 700 mile overland route that stretches from Hanoi to the Fishhook and Parrot's Beak. As a matter of fact, since the last known arms shipment to Sihanoukville was in July 1969, the land route has been the sole supply channel for the last 13 months.



**Page Denied**

25X1

25X1

25X1

Next 3 Page(s) In Document Denied

SECRET

25X11

Nature of Overland System

Let me turn now to a description of the supply route south and how it works. I want to stress at the outset that this is not a catch-as-catch-can arrangement involving an indeterminate number of coolies and trucks working their way through the jungle. Instead, it is a highly resourceful, flexible system operated by a tightly structured organization.

The logistics organization which supplies Communist forces in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia is the General Directorate of Rear Services (GDRS), located in Hanoi. It is subordinate to the North Vietnamese Ministry of National Defense. In the Laotian Panhandle, to name a specific area, the NVA 559th Transportation Group has been in business since 1959. The 559th TG has about 40,000 personnel handling transport, engineer, commo liaison, and infantry assignments. Its truck inventory is maintained at an estimated 1,400 trucks in current use. (This probably represents about 10% of the North Vietnamese truck inventory.)

The logistics system stretches more than 700 miles, from Hanoi to supply bases along the border of South Vietnam. This system uses all available

modes of transport except air to move supplies southward.

Since the total bombing halt on 31 October 1968, Vinh has become the major storage and distribution center in the panhandle of North Vietnam. Supply shipments destined for South Vietnam are transported over a net of roads, waterways, and a meter-gauge tramway. These feed into the cross-border corridors linking up with the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos. Some supplies move directly south across the DMZ to support NVA forces in that area.

In July 1968 the North Vietnamese began to build a petroleum pipeline capable of moving up to 1,000 tons of fuel per day. This line now extends south from Vinh through the Mu Gia Pass and some 22 miles into Laos. More recently, the Communists have built another pipeline farther to the south, crossing the border near the western DMZ and terminating near Tchepone--the major logistical transfer point in southern Laos for supplies destined for South Vietnam. The addition of the two pipelines to the enemy's logistic system provides him with the year-round means of transporting large amounts of petroleum across the rugged Laotian border.



In southern Laos, there are three logistics corridors which provide cross-border access from North Vietnam to the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos. They employ five major roads, a well established water route, two petroleum pipelines, and numerous trails.

The oldest and the northernmost active corridor crosses through the Mu Gia Pass, 80 miles southwest of Vinh. The second corridor crosses the Laotian border at Ban Karai Pass 40 miles farther south. A third cross-border route in the vicinity of the western DMZ is the most complex of the three, comprising three major road crossings, with a fourth presently under construction, the heavily-used Se Bang Hieng River, and, as mentioned earlier, the newly completed petroleum pipeline extending into Tchepone.

To expand the capacity of the major north-south artery, the North Vietnamese have undertaken a major road-building program during the past several dry seasons. Parallel road segments and numerous by-passes have been built to create a dual road system. The Se Kong River crosses the north-south route at Ban Bac and winds south 145 miles to the Cambodian border. Until now, only the extreme northern and

SECRET

25X11

southern reaches of the river have been used, but we have recent indications that the North Vietnamese intend to exploit the river more fully.

Between the DMZ and the triborder area of Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam (Base Area 609) supplies are moved into South Vietnam over a network of trails and one major road (route 9 into the A Shau valley). This route serves the supply needs of the enemy in I and II Corps and is a fairly high volume operation.

Logistic support to the B-3 Front in South Vietnam has been chiefly supplied from depots in the triborder area (Base Area 609) and from Base Area 740 adjacent to Quang Duc Province. Reconnaissance reports indicate that truck transport is used on only the northern 40-50 miles of this corridor. Bicycles, animal carts, and porters move it the rest of the way. Below the B-3 Front, enemy forces are supplied by Rear Services groups concentrated in 12 Base Areas in South Vietnam and Cambodia.

**B. Operation of the System Under Air Attack**

I would like now to describe how the system has stood up under US bombing campaigns with particular reference to the period between March and November 1968.

SECRET

25X11

1. In North Vietnam--During the four years of the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign against North Vietnam from March 1965 to November 1968 the supply system proved surprisingly durable. North Vietnamese success in offsetting the effects of the bombing was achieved in large part through inventive countermeasures. Hanoi put some 600,000 people to work, full and part-time, repairing bombed roads and railroads and building new roads and railroads as well as hundreds of bypass bridges and fords, pontoon bridges, underwater bridges, and ferries. Supplies and transport equipment were moved under cover of darkness and through sanctuaries provided by air strike restraints. During this period--assisted by large amounts of supplies from their Communist allies--the North Vietnamese were able to maintain and even expand their logistical flows.

The Communist supply system got its most severe test during the last seven months of the Rolling Thunder program--the period of the partial bombing

SECRET

25X1

halt (31 March-31 October 1968). The US bombing campaign was probably the most effective it had been in complicating the flow of supplies from North Vietnam to South Vietnam. Bombing was concentrated on logistics targets south of the 19th parallel, [REDACTED]

25X1

25X1

[REDACTED] Also, damage inflicted to trucks and watercraft was considerably higher than the first quarter of 1968. [REDACTED]

25X1

25X1

Heavy traffic continued to move through the Panhandle area in July and August.

In September, however, the flow of traffic decreased considerably. In addition to the heavy bombing campaign, the Communists had to contend with extremely heavy rainfall during the month. In late August and September, North Vietnam was hit by a succession of typhoons which affected traffic flows throughout the whole country. High water at Hai Duong on the Hanoi-Haiphong line closed this route for about two weeks. Flooding at Binh Dinh and Phuong Dinh closed the Hanoi-Vinh line for a time. Severe flooding disrupted activities in an area southeast of Kep.

Throughout this period, road construction and repair activity progressed throughout the country. New road segments were constructed in the Vinh area to supplement the road system leading toward the DMZ and toward Laos. The Hanoi Rail/Highway Bridge--popularly called the Paul Doumer Bridge--was reopened to vehicular as well as rail traffic in mid-June.

For the period July-September as a whole, damage to logistical targets was significant.

25X1

25X1

SECRET

25X1

or damaged, slightly more than during the previous period.

October was the final month of the Rolling Thunder campaign. [REDACTED]

25X1

25X1

[REDACTED] Heavy rains as well as the intense interdiction campaign slowed logistic activity throughout the area, and damage dropped appreciably.

During the weeks in September-October immediately preceding the total bombing halt over North Vietnam the US began a major interdiction campaign against four checkpoints located in Laos south of the main infiltration routes through Mu Gia and Ban Karai passes.

[REDACTED]

25X1

An analysis of the traffic moving through this area indicated that this bombing program caused no permanent stoppage to the movement of truck traffic.

[REDACTED]

while one or more of these areas were repeatedly closed.

enemy countermeasures were usually effective in restoring serviceability in a matter of days, or in some instances, a matter of hours. One notable exception was the Ban La Boy/Hotel area on Route 912 south of Ban Karai pass, which was closed to truck traffic from late December to late January.

To sum up this portion of my briefing, the last seven months of the Rolling Thunder program was probably the most effective period of the entire air war against North Vietnam in terms of complicating the flow of supplies from North Vietnam to South Vietnam. At the same time, it was clear that the Communists were continuing to <sup>move</sup> ~~move~~ large numbers of men and more tons of supplies than ever before into the northern end of the supply route to South Vietnam. The bombing program was forcing the North Vietnamese to pay a heavy "tax" to support the war in the South, but much of the tax was being paid by the USSR and China, <sup>which</sup> ~~which~~ <sup>furnished the supplies.</sup> supplied the North Vietnamese with about \$3.0 billion of military and economic aid between 1965-68.

**Page Denied**

Next 84 Page(s) In Document Denied

25X1